vocation in pianissimo:

the loss and recovery of vocation in contemporary life

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On the corner of Fourth Street and Muhammad Ali Boulevard in Louisville, Kentucky, there is a cast-iron plaque that symbolizes as well as anything I know the deep significance of vocation for our contemporary life. The plaque commemorates Thomas Merton's 1958 "Vision in Louisville." Here, as Merton later recounted, he "suddenly realized that I loved all the people and that none of them were, or could be, totally alien to me. . . . My vocation does not really make me different from the rest of men or put me in a special category except artificially, juridically. I am still a member of the human race, and what more glorious destiny is there for man, since the Word was made flesh and became, too, a member of the Human Race!" Merton's deep identification with the whole of humanity became for him a new beginning in his life-long quest to become what God wants of everyone: to be fully the creature that God intends, and in so doing to bring joy and delight to the Creator. "Thank God! Thank God! I am only another member of the human race like all the rest of them. I have the immense joy of being a man!"

We are less inclined to consider this "vision" and the transformation it precipitated as paradigmatic of vocational experience because Merton's earlier decision to become a monk at the Abbey of Gethsemani seems much more representative of responding to God's call. Becoming a Trappist monk has all the marks of a genuine vocational sensibility: a period of aimless, anguished, and discontented searching; intense prayer to God (even if this God is uncertainly known) seeking direction; the gradual realization of one's true nature and the rejection of one's past as a rebellion against it; and joy and peace in the recognition that one has found one's way. This sort of searching, and the insights it produces, makes for a compelling and exciting narrative. We know this because Merton's memoir on this time in his life, *The Seven Story Mountain*, became a national best-seller, providing inspiration to scores of individuals, many of whom decided to follow Merton into the monastery.

The "Vision in Louisville," however, took Merton out of the monastery. Though he would remain a monk, this vision reflects Merton's ability to embrace the world in a way his entry into Gethsemani did not. Why might this latter embrace be more determinative for our understanding of vocation? Because vocation (from the Latin *vocare*, which means "to call") refers to a person's calling, and thus presupposes a life lived in response to a summons (*vocatio*) from another. A vocation, unlike a career, is not a choice we initiate. It follows from and grows within a life that has become attentive to others who can question, provoke, inspire, and correct us. To be sure, we should understand Merton's entry into the Trappist order as a response to a call from God. What this response left unfulfilled, however, was a broadening of scope and commitment beyond the Creator to include God's creation as a whole. In the "Vision in Louisville" Merton opened his life and made himself available and responsive to everyone. We might say that Merton's solitude, formerly fuelled by personal longing and the sense of his aloneness, after Louisville came to be inspired by a more varied and openly social encounter and engagement with others.

our context for vocation

In thinking about vocation, its meaning but also its possibility, the concrete and practical character of our living is critical because the patterns of our lives—the way we configure our built environments and schedules, the ways we choose and maintain our relationships, how we establish goals—determine whether or not we will hear, and thus respond to, another's summons. We must ask: is it possible that our culture, because of the priorities and plans in life that it models for us, may actually make it more difficult to hear the voice calling to us?

This may sound strange, for few of us are likely to admit that we are hard of hearing. But hearing is, indeed, one of our most pressing problems. We live in a culture that saturates us with one over-riding message: the world belongs to us, is ours for the taking, if only we exert our skill and ingenuity. Everywhere we look, whether we examine our living spaces, the media, or even our churches, we see the significance of ME! Everywhere we turn, we are reminded of the opportunities to satisfy self-chosen ends and desires, and the importance of doing so. In this world there is little room for another (even the Holy Other) to appear as genuinely other, and thus little chance that some voice will register as distinct from my own and will be heeded as in some way authoritative or determinative for my living.

Consider the following comment from the head of Philips Design, an international electronics firm: "consumers want to be omnipresent, omniscient and

omnipotent, with the maximum of comfort and freedom and with the minimum of effort." As consumers, now eplete with divine attributes, we want a world tailored to uit our own preferences and desires. We do not like to be old that our wants are inordinate or possibly unjust. We eek to be like gods, to be absolute beings, not constrained or limited by anyone or anything. The most convenient way or us to achieve our godlike status is to believe that others, f they count at all, have their own spheres of influence that lo not overlap with or impinge upon our own, and to act on his belief. You do your thing, I'll do mine.

Since there is little in an individualistic society that either constrains or informs the way we choose to live, we have substituted careerism for vocation. As is well known, many people today move through several different careers in their lifetime. What often drives this movement from one career to another is the quest for greater (and usually this is identified as "more financially lucrative") opportunity and self-satisfaction. There is little sense in the careerist mindset that our choosing and our living are beholden or accountable to a reality—whether community, region, or God—greater than ourselves. The world is ours for the taking. The most successful among us are those who have taken the most. These are the rugged and resourceful individuals who "deserve" to be rewarded handsomely.

BUT ARE WE HONEST WITH OURSELVES AND TRUE TO THE world when we cast ourselves in such individualistic language as this? In the 1920s the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber—a philosopher Merton read in earnest—described in memorable terms the nature of the modern predicament, an analysis that remains true to this day. He noted that, in fact, no one lives alone. "To be" is to be "in relation." Our lives, when we look more closely, are shot through with various forms of interdependence. We see this on a biological level in our need for food and water and air, and on the social level in our need to express ourselves through the medium of a symbolic (and thus shared) world. For the most part, however, we do not like to acknowledge our dependence on others. "The self-willed man does not believe and does not meet. He does not know solidarity of connexion, but only the feverish world outside and his feverish desire to use it." And so others are reduced to the status of objects that can be understood, controlled, and used for our own personal benefit. As objects of a utilitarian mind they are not in a position to challenge our claims to possess or ignore them. This is the world of the "I-It," a world in which the integrity or sanctity of others is not recognized.

To this objectifying and instrumental stance in the world Buber contrasted the more authentic "I-Thou" relation. To receive and engage the world as a "Thou" rather than an "It" means that we no longer treat others as items within a self-chosen and self-coordinated plan. Whereas "I-It" bespeaks our separation from others, "I-Thou" bears witness to a meeting with another in which genuine welcome and exchange can occur. In this meeting my desire is transformed because it is now questioned and redirected by the integrity of the other. Most importantly, when another person is met as "Thou," he or she speaks to me and I listen. Another person related to as "It" is silent, not because incapable of speaking, but due to our unwillingness to hear. "I-It" is the path of alienation and individuation whereas "I-Thou" is the path of meeting and mutuality. "All reality is an activity in which I share without being able to appropriate for myself. Where there is no sharing there is no reality. Where there is self-appropriation there is no reality. The more direct the contact with the Thou, the fuller is the sharing."

BUBER'S ANALYSIS ATTEMPTED TO SHOW THAT HUMAN LIFE lived at its most authentic pitch is dialogical. A dialogical life is one in which the lives of others—whether plant, animal, human, or divine—intersect meaningfully with our own so that the course of our living is adjusted to be more responsive to their rightful claims and needs. Presupposing interdependence, we can see now that a responsible human life is one that acknowledges, respects, and celebrates the integrity and the call of others. The problem with so many trends in contemporary life is that they reduce human existence to a monological level, even to the level of the soliloquy, because we only are the ones who do the thinking, talking, deciding, etc. Others do not practically inform our acting and our planning because they are not really permitted to speak to us. Their voices have been either silenced altogether or reduced to the whisper of a pianissimo.

the silencing of others

Again, it may seem strange to suggest that others have been silenced, because many of us feel that we live in a world of constant speech and intervention. Television, radio, a barrage of sales pitches, Instant Messenger, pop-up ads, cellular telephones, beepers, and pagers all make sure that we cannot escape others. And so we crave silence and quiet because of the cacophony of voices that address, even assault, us. The world around us, we are tempted to say, has not become quieter but much noisier, so noisy in fact that we sometimes wish to follow Merton into the silence of the Trappists.

If we are to understand this silencing of others that has been detrimental to a sense of calling in our own lives we need to realize that there are different kinds of silence as well as different kinds of speaking. It is possible, for instance, that a person can speak without really being heard or being heard only falsely. This failure of genuine communication may stem from our lack of preparation to listen (we don't know "where they are coming from") or from a refusal to hear anything other than what we want to hear (our minds have already "been made up"). Sometimes the

encounter with another reveals so many differences—in culture, language, or desire—that it is hard to establish common ground. As Buber would put it, people meet, but their minds do not. The net effect, however, is the same in that my world, despite being addressed by another, remains unchallenged and unchanged. Lacking genuine connection, the encounter does not affect or redirect my ways of thinking or acting because as a rational agent I am in charge of my world. Whenever I meet others I do so in terms that are acceptable to and established by me.

Another way to put this is to say that as modern individuals we are autonomous or free. We are each a law (*nomos*) unto ourselves (*autos*), having been liberated from the shackles of tradition and authority. The mark of our enlightenment, as Immanuel Kant famously put it, is that we have the courage to "think for ourselves." Modern life in its many practical forms—in politics, economics, education, religion—reflects this growing tendency to protect the individual as much as possible from external influence or compulsion. We are in charge of our lives and finally answerable to no one but ourselves.

Even as we exalted the autonomy of the individual, we relegated our freedom to paths of alienation, disenchantment, boredom, and anxiety.

It would be foolish, as well as supremely ungrateful, to suggest that these forms of liberation are uniformly bad. Nobody wants to go back to a world in which vast segments of the population—women, rural folk, ethnic and racial minorities, the handicapped and mentally ill—had no say over the course of their lives. But it would also be naïve to think that the harvest of modernity has been unambiguously good, for even as we exalted the autonomy of the individual, we relegated our freedom to paths of alienation, disenchantment, boredom, and anxiety. Fewer and fewer, one could argue, know what their freedom is ultimately for. In fact, many of us feel that the choices we make are, in the end, without much significance or value.

How we became modern individuals, as well as the implications of this novel development, is an immensely complex affair. At stake, however, is a clear understanding of how modernity and postmodernity foster new ways of relating to others. As I will argue, the varied cultural developments we call modernity significantly changed the way we structure our practical lives. The result, owing to the increasing insularity and independence of self from other, is that a sympathetic hearing of others has become much more difficult. We can see this if we briefly highlight a few of the salient features of modern and postmodern life: urbanization, technology, consumerism, risk, and violence.

First, we should note that contemporary life is increasingly urban life. Indeed, the mass migration of millions of people from farms, or from villages closely tied to farming life, represents an unparalleled development in human history. What is lost in this development is not simply a "way of life," but a feel for the reality of the larger than human world and the sense that we have any obligation to care for the living forms through which we necessarily live. Our overriding temptation is to forget that we are biological beings enmeshed in biological processes that are vulnerable to exhaustion and destruction. Urban life, in other words, shields us from our dependence on a bewildering host of natural, non-human others, with the result that we now think we live in a purely human world. The natural world, like so much else in a consumer society, is either reduced to entertainment or to a limitless fund from which we can draw resources as we see fit. That the natural world has a sanctity of its own, or that its members or diverse habitats have a claim upon our being, is lost on us. Nature doesn't speak, mostly because we are insulated from nature and do not have the ears to hear or the eyes to see. And so we continue to destroy at an unparalleled pace, without much remorse or sympathy, but with a great deal of ignorance.

Our insularity becomes clear if we think about food. Few of us today have the appreciation or knowledge of where our daily food comes from, and what natural conditions are necessary so that safe, nutritious food can be produced over the long term, i.e., we don't understand the vital connection between healthy food and healthy soils, watersheds, and natural habitats. Given that virtually all the "food" we buy is heavily processed and laced with preservatives, and given that much of it travels more than a thousand miles before it reaches our stores, we are in no position to determine whether our eating is just or unjust, healthy or sickly, beneficial or destructive. Habitats are thus reduced to resource stockpiles that we manage however we see fit. Whether or not natural organisms have integrity of their own is a question most of us cannot meaningfully entertain.

Furthermore, contemporary life is increasingly mediated by technology. Cultural critics ranging from Neil Postman to George Grant to Sven Birkerts have all noted how technology has really become the ontology of our age. What they mean is that technology does not simply refer to the growing number of gadgets or devices that supposedly make it easier for us to live in the world (after all, the spirit of invention has been with us for a very long time). Rather, the technological complex itself has become the medium through which we encounter and experience reality. A technological filament now runs through most of our encounters with others so that we no longer meet them directly and in their full depth and complexity. What we know and what we experience is what our technological media filter, frame, crop, or airbrush, all determined by the limits of the machine, its program, programmers, and financial sponsors.

Raising questions about the pervasive presence of technology in our practical lives does not make us Luddites. The issue is not whether we are for technology or against it. Rather, what is at stake is how technological devices determine how we will experience and relate to others. What happens in a technological age is that a machine becomes a substitute for attentive, patient, intensive, and refined skills that otherwise develop as the result of socially determined contexts. We like machines because in many instances they make our lives easier: we don't have to work as hard or as long, nor do we need to master as many skills or depend on others for help. Our connection to reality is readily reduced to 'the pushing of buttons and the turning of handles.' The result, however, is that we become more disengaged from others and from reality, relating to them with less care and understanding. And so we become easily bored, forever on the search for novel, more enticing, forms of entertainment. As Albert Borgmann has noted, " . . . the feelings of liberation and enrichment [guaranteed by a machinery not of our design and often beyond our understanding] quickly fade; the new devices lose their glamour and meld into the inconspicuous periphery of normalcy; boredom replaces exhilaration."

Third, contemporary life is for the most part consumer life. Clearly, it would be a mistake to think consumption itself to be a bad thing. After all, to survive we must consume water, food, goods, and services. Consumption becomes problematic, however, when it becomes the dominant means we have for connecting with others, and when it is not balanced by the understanding that follows from also being producers in the world. To be a producer is to be attentive to and to work within limits determined by natural and social contexts (we have to work with available and useful materials to satisfy socially-driven and accepted needs). But when we live primarily as consumers these contexts recede in significance, and the limits for our deciding and purchasing are then driven primarily by our own or media-manufactured desires.

Consumerism reflects an oblique relation to reality. Others come to be viewed as commodities and thus are not experienced in their true depth. They register now primarily in terms of how they satisfy our own advancement. Given that we evaluate ourselves by comparing ourselves to others, it is inevitable that we will consume pointlessly, simply so that we will be perceived to fit within a group or be further ahead than our rivals. Moreover, as mere commodities, things appear to us anonymously and without context. It is safe to say that never before have we shopped with as much ignorance as we do today. We don't know how things were made, what all the (personal, social, environmental) costs were, who made them and under what conditions, and we are thus powerless to consider whether or not our consuming is done with even a measure of justice or compassion.

Fourth, contemporary life is experienced by many as a precarious existence. In part this has to do with a fundamental transformation that occurs in modern societies. Speaking very generally, one of the most important features about traditional societies is that they provide a sense of order in which time and place have a determined significance. Change occurs slowly and is incorporated within a larger structure that makes for a feeling of security and permanence. Modern societies, characterized as they are by (increasingly global) economic and industrial development, sever the connection between time and place as discrete localities and their systems of order are penetrated and shaped by foreign influences. Social and economic relations become "disembedded," lifted out of their local contexts, and are redefined by factors beyond the control of any particular group. As a farmer, for instance, I no longer produce for myself or my neighbor but for people far away and in economic conditions over which I have little control.

THE PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THIS DEVELOPMENT ARE immense because they render a riskier, undetermined future. We don't know what might happen next because the paths of our own existence are perpetually being interrupted by foreign paths we could not have foreseen or predicted. In a fast paced, competitive, global environment we must be ready to scrap existing schedules or plans to take advantage of whatever opportunity comes along. The result is that the bonds that tie us to others, to region, even to principles, become much more temporary, superficial, and tenuous. We have to be flexible and mobile if we are to be successful. The cost of our flexibility, however, is a diminishment in our capacity to trust each other (trust being a key element in the formation of deep social bonds). We are not around long enough and don't have the time (measured in years) to really get to know, and hence, to trust, each other.

Finally, contemporary life is perceived to be violent and dangerous. The danger referred to here is not simply the fear of human aggression and destruction, since these have been with us from the time of Cain. Rather, and owing to the dissolution of community boundaries and protections, the danger that many feel stems from the unpredictability and foreignness of others who are perceived to interfere with or interrupt the comforts of the familiar. When one adds to this the fiercely competitive character of global economics, we should not be surprised to see a rise in xenophobia, tribalism, and ethnic hatred and violence. Faced with uncertainty, and operating in a context of general ignorance of others who are different from ourselves, we instinctively close ourselves off from others or lash out at them in fear, seeking security or innocence.

Clearly, this is a troubling phenomenon because it reinforces separation and a general avoidance of others. Keeping other people at arm's length becomes more worri-

some, however, with the realization that what we most need—patient, sustained encounters with others so that our differences can be faced, understood, and accepted—we cannot have, given the frenetic pace and general insensitivity of global competitiveness. It is much easier and simpler to demonize the other and to see in them the cause of all our own troubles. But in doing this we only perpetuate and escalate cycles of misunderstanding and violence.

embracing the world

I have been arguing that contemporary life makes it much more difficult for us to enter into deep, abiding relationships with (human and non-human) others. The result is that we cannot, practically speaking, be in a position to hear with sensitivity or sympathy what others have to say to us. Their call to us, and their claim upon us, goes unnoticed. Given this reality, it is not surprising that many of us, despite throngs of people and an unending noisy assault through various media, find ourselves alone, uninspired, bereft of a meaningful sense of purpose. Though we may find ourselves together with others, we are not genuinely present to each other or available to each other's needs and concerns.

This development is of tremendous vocational and theological significance because at issue is not only the silencing of creation, but also the silencing of the Creator. As Buber put it, "Every particular Thou is a glimpse through to the eternal Thou . . . If you explore the life of things and of conditional being you come to the unfathomable, if you deny the life of things and of conditional being you stand before nothingness, if you hallow this life you meet the living God." As we insulate or close ourselves off from others we condemn ourselves to loneliness and want, just as we falsify the dialogical character of all living. In this context the only possible god that remains is an irrelevant or impotent god, an idol that merely reinforces the ubiquity of self-presence in the world.

What we most need is an intentional effort to resist our culture's ways; in so doing we open our selves to healthier, and more communal and convivial lives.

If we are to overcome our anomie and recover a strong sense of calling in our lives we must learn, as Merton did, to accept fully our humanity as interdependent created beings. This means that we need to overcome the alienation, insularity, fear, suspicion, arrogance, ignorance, and inattentiveness that often characterize our relatedness to others. We need to develop concrete, sustained practices that will bring us into closer and deeper proximity with one another, for it is out of this intimacy that we will see how we need each other and how we benefit each other. We will also come to listen better, gradually to hear the other's call to us, and thus find our lives inspired, directed, and corrected.

Achieving such deep connections is by no means an easy matter. The patterns of contemporary life—speed, flexibility, consumption, cynicism, individuation—all militate against it. And so what we most need is an intentional effort to resist our culture's ways, recognizing that in so doing we open ourselves to healthier, and more communal and convivial lives.

A good place to begin is in the development of what Albert Borgmann has called "focal practices." A focal practice is an activity that aims to draw us more deeply into the complexity of reality because, as we are drawn in, the world in its details and mystery now becomes illuminated for us. As an example, consider something as simple as a family meal. It begins with the preparation of food. Cooks will start by thinking about what the family members like to eat and what is good for them. This will require some familiarity with personal taste as well as scientific matters of nutrition (if the cook does not know what his or her family members like to eat, that will be a clear indicator of family disconnect, and a call to get to know them better). Then the cook will need to assemble the food for its preparation. Here, too, the cook will want to know whether the food he or she is buying is good food, fresh and wholesome, rather than the pseudo-food produced by flavor-factories. This presupposes some understanding of the food system or, if one is more diligent, a willingness to grow one's own food and thus palpably witness its quality. The meal itself, carefully and lovingly prepared, can now be an occasion in which family members eat and share together, learn about each other's triumphs and struggles, joys and pains. In participating in a family meal the world of the family, its needs and concerns, but also the needs of the world as it impinges upon the family, become illuminated. By listening attentively we can develop personal plans for action that respond sympathetically and compassionately to what we have learned. Space and time are intentionally created so that the voices of others can be heard and addressed. Each person, in turn, gains an important perspective on how he or she should order and live his or her life.

To be successful, the family meal cannot be rushed or entirely controlled because what is most important is that family members become available to each other. Each of us alone going to a fast-food establishment on our own time would merely perpetuate family ignorance and indifference. Making room for a family meal is, we must admit, a counter-cultural practice. All of us are too busy, driven by chaotic schedules that keep us apart rather than bring us together. We must learn to make choices that protect what is most important. We need to learn to say no to cultural and economic forces that separate or shield us from each other.

Of course, the meal need not be restricted to family members. As history and anthropological research abundantly demonstrate, the meal has long played an important

role in breaking down barriers between insiders and outsiders, the familiar and the foreign. Mealtime is a time of hospitality wherein strangers have the potential to become companions (from the Latin *compan*—literally "one who shares bread" with another), even friends. We should not be surprised, then, that the meal, as in the Eucharist, is also of great religious significance for it is in our eating together, in the community and mission we create together, that we concretely display what we understand our divine calling in life to be.

NUMEROUS EXAMPLES OF FOCAL PRACTICES, OF PEOPLE becoming present to each other and attentive to their contexts, can be described and imagined. They can even be linked to what we otherwise characterize as careers. Teaching can be understood as a focal practice when teachers become intentional about attending to and connecting with their students in ways that allow for their distinct identities and concerns and potential to emerge. Doctoring can be the occasion for the patient to have his or her idiosyncratic needs sympathetically examined and addressed. Farming, unlike agribusiness, can be the work of genuine husbandry wherein the farmer attends to the specific limits and possibilities of the land and of animals. Building can be an activity in which builders respond to the unique demands of materials (do we have sufficient and sustainable supplies of wood and metal?), design (will this particular building endure, be efficient and beautiful?), and communal need (is the community best served by this project?). Mere jobs are transformed into focal practices with the patient effort to understand more clearly and with greater sensitivity and care. The overriding goal is to open ourselves more fully to the integrity of the world, for without its integrity it cannot have a voice that is uniquely its own. To do any of this, however, will require time. It will also require patience and a willingness to repent and forgive each other, since few of us are so faithful as to be true to each other all of the time. Listening cannot be forced or sped up, because at issue is our willingness to give up control and to submit ourselves to the call and the needs of others.

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I have suggested that a meaningful sense of vocation depends on the possibility that we be open to hearing the call of another, that we become genuinely present to each other. Our examination of a limited number of trends in contemporary life indicates that this is not as easy as it seems. We are not especially well-positioned to attend to each other because the patterns of our practical living reinforce isolation and the silencing of others. I am also suggesting that it is a mistake to think that vocation depends on some special, even supernatural, calling from the heavens. Though it may well be that God has a "special plan" for our life, waiting for such a plan more often than not serves the purpose of enabling us to evade the calls of others around us right now.

This is an important point that needs emphasis. Waiting for a "special call" from God presumes that our relationship with God is fundamentally private—God and I have a communication line that is cut off from others and cannot be interfered with—a notion that clearly reflects a modern, individualistic sensibility. What this view denies is that our relation to God, as well as God's relation to us, is mediated through the life of creation as a whole. We meet God as we participate in the life of God as revealed in creation, the human face, and the community of a body of believers focused on and inspired by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is a delusion to think that we can be in a meaningful relationship with God if our relations with others are violent, jealous, destructive, or dishonorable. But as we attend to others, even 'one of the least of these who are members of my family' (Matt 25:40), we at the same time attend to God.

What we need to do, as well as what we need to know, is, for the most part, available to us if we but make ourselves attentive and available to the world. This is the point that Merton learned as he struggled to realize the implications of his "Vision in Louisville." Understanding and living one's divinely appointed vocation is not about getting control over our lives and faith so that nothing can get between us and God. It is, rather, about "letting go." As Paul Elie puts it in *The Life You Save May be Your Own*, "The spirituality of stripping and letting go, the practice of religious detachment, would be his [Merton's] way out of Gethsemani; it would be the key to his life in the 1960s, the root of his sympathy with religious people of all kinds." And it should be, likewise, the key to our lives.

The whole of creation is currently in a state of languishing and exhaustion. We see this in unprecedented species loss, habitat destruction, community disintegration, and worker anxiety and stress. The question of first importance is whether or not we can hear creation's groanings. Do we have the patience and the care to be attentive to its needs? Following upon that, we need to ask whether we have the resolve and commitment to respond practically in ways that will alleviate suffering and celebrate health wherever we find it. This is our task. This is our calling as creatures made in the image of God yet sharing in the fate of creation. Though our work may at times seem mundane, it is always fraught with divine significance, for in serving the well-being of all of creation's members we bring peace to the world and delight to God.

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